

Radio Interview Transcript - ABC Life Matters Programme (576AM)

Speaking with Marina Sherbak (ACL Auburn Educational Manager),

ACL Auburn students and teacher and

Helen Zimmerman (ACL Group Managing Director)

with

Life Matters presenter Richard Aedy

21 March 2007 9:00 am

Duration: 20 minutes 35 seconds

Richard: Should a formal English language test be part of earning Australian citizenship? So far the government has given broad details only of the proposed citizenship requirements but it seems likely proficiency in English will be a requirement. As we are about to hear refugees are amongst the most eager of new arrivals to become Australian citizens. One of Australia's largest English language colleges ACL has put more than 10,000 students through a citizenship course. Shortly we'll hear more about that, but firstly let's go to an ACL college where our reporter Hagar Cohen met some of the students who are trying to learn English as fast as they possibly can.

[Classroom audio]

Teacher: Ok everybody now let's look at the colours. How about the colours here?

Student: Colour red...

Teacher: Colour red.

Class: Red.

Student: Green.

Teacher and class: Green.

Student: Yellow.

Teacher and class: Yellow.

Teacher: Blue.

Marina: This is the very beginners, and we call them the pre-curriculum level because these are mostly refugees with no literacy in their first language... and they

can't write, they often have never had experiences of holding even a pen in their hand.

Class and Teacher: Apple, apple, apple, apple (*class laugh*).

Teacher: P-u-r-p-l-e.

Class: Purple.

Teacher: Very good.

Marina: And Tricia is the teacher and as you can see in this class there are quite a few African students most of them are from Sudan and the others are from Afghanistan.

Tricia (to class): You need to put the word and the letter together, so we have to find these two. Do they go?

Student: No.

Tricia: No.

Marina: My name is Marina Sherbak and currently I am acting Educational Manager for ACL Auburn and I've been working for ACL for about seven years by now. I first started as a teacher, and then continued as a multi-media teacher, as a teacher coordinator and finally as an acting manager.

[Classroom laughter and chatter]

Marina: I'd say it is challenging but it is interesting because it's very... I've been finding it ah very creative and inspiring working with migrant learners because it's a double way process, you not only teach them, you also communicate and interact with different cultures, and you learn a lot from them.

[Classroom laughter and chatter]

Marina: It is difficult because students come from different cultures and backgrounds and very often they were coming from war areas and they didn't have an easy life... and for some of them coming to Australia as a refugee, is not a matter of choice... and then after they come it's not only learning English its also adjusting and starting life in a different culture. And settling in, it's basically recreating your own life.

Milenko: My name is Milenko Popadic I came from Bosnia and I came here in 1998.

Cohen: Why did you leave Bosnia?

Milenko: Because of war and then what happened after war as well, so it was really hard to find a job and just feed family.

Cohen: So it actually affected you personally and your family?

Milenko: Yeah and also we lost everything we had, and we had to move from our place where we used to live so yeah... so we had to go somewhere.

[Classroom laughter and chatter]

Milenko: Actually in Bosnia we didn't have those ATMs at the time when I left so for me it was really difficult just to use bank card (*laughs*) and to withdraw money. You have money on your account... you have to find out how to withdraw money and then also it was difficult for us, like for me was... my age because I felt all the time am I stupid, what's wrong with me, shouldn't I know this language?

Marina: It's learning skills as well; how to learn, how to listen, when to come to class, what do in the class, how to speak to the other students in the class. Well they start from ABC and for many of them it's a long way and for some of them it takes years before they start being confident and comfortable enough.

Tricia (to class): Now if we, if you're asked this question what makes a good teacher? What do you think are the qualities of a good teacher? What qualities do you think a good teacher needs to have?

Student: Patience (*the class repeats*).

Tricia: Patience, okay.

Student: Use evidence when she explains.

Tricia: Okay give plenty of examples, okay.

Student: Well presented.

Tricia: Well presented - what do you mean well presented as in (*laughs*)?

Student: Looking nice.

Tricia: Like me? (*laughs*).

Tricia: (*name inaudible*) you come from Ethiopia so is English taught at all schools?

(Name Inaudible): Come again.

Tricia: Is English taught at all schools in Ethiopia?

(Name Inaudible): Yeah it's the official language.

Tricia: Alright now Zena you're from Lebanon so in Lebanon when is English taught?

Zena: Ah some schools, some schools, choose English but the majority of schools choose the French, we taken English like a third language with Arabic - Arabic first, so then French, and then some English.

Tricia: All right that's good. What about in China, Spring?

Spring: In China, from primary school we need to learn English, but just for grammar and reading language and we be taught conversation to speak our English.

Tricia: To improve your spoken English as well.

Spring: Yeah.

[Music plays]

Mohamed: My name is Mohamed Sununu Bah. I come from Sierra Leone West Africa and I am 23 years old. I have been to Australia for 10 month.

Cohen: Did you learn English in Sierra Leone?

Mohamed: No, no, no I left Sierra Leone when I was very young, six, when I was six years old. I went to Guinea and then Guinea is the French colony. I study French in Guinea and when I came to Australia I don't know anything about English I learnt all my English at ACL here.

Cohen: Do you have many friends that you met in Australia?

Mohamed: Yeah, I have many friends.

Cohen: From Sierra Leone or from...?

Mohamed: Oh some are Australian, some are from Sierra Leone, some are from my community yeah.

Cohen: And how do you find it here, do you like it in Australia?

Mohamed: I love it (*laughs*).

Ali Shasar: My name Ali Shasar Mobarak and I am from Afghanistan. I am 22 year old. Because of fights we just came from Afghanistan and then we came to Pakistan and we also left Pakistan then we went to Iran and also then we left Iran and then we came to again Pakistan and now we are in Australia.

Cohen: When you arrived what were the barriers you had to communicating?

Ali Shasar: You can say then I can speak conversation with some Aussie people like you can say, I probably couldn't catch anything. You could say 30 per cent out of 100 I catch because they use a lot of slang so it's very difficult for me.

Tricia: So some of them, would come to class you know especially at the very beginning and not really understand what they are doing there.

Marina: Of course yeah that's exactly what happens. They don't know anything, they don't understand anything. It's not only language, it's a completely different life, it's a completely different culture, they've never experienced before and uh it's a different

world and they are like children who start learning about things, from the very beginning.

[Music plays]

Richard: Well most people would agree that learning English is important as we have just heard, even for the highly motivated new arrival. It's not as easy as it sounds. With me now is Helen Zimmerman Managing Director of one of Australia's biggest English language schools ACL Group. Welcome to Life Matters Helen.

Helen: Thank you Richard.

Richard: Let's start with the basics, how hard is it to learn English, especially for some of your students who have no previous experience with the language?

Helen: We get people who come to the program who range in ages from 18 to 80, who have backgrounds where they might come from a pre-literate society or a rural society where they have never even held a pen to those who are tertiary - educated professionals.

Richard: So there is a range of difficulties.

Helen: There is an absolute range. Some people are highly familiar with a roman script language and those people particularly if they have had education in their own country are likely to be fast paced learners. Ah, those that come from non roman script or...

Richard: That's our alphabet.

Helen: That's our alphabet that's right, or come from an oral tradition where there isn't a tradition of books, there isn't a tradition of reading street signs, that's going to take a bit longer.

Richard: In practical terms how much effort are we talking about?

Helen: It's a lot. Australians and migrants want to integrate into Australian society. They want to participate in the workforce and they want to be part of a growing Australia and building their lives. Now to do those things they are entitled to up to 510 hours or achieving functional English, which is basic social, proficiency so that's being able to negotiate an exchange in a shop, make a doctors appointment that sort of thing.

Richard: That's a bit over 12 weeks isn't it 13 weeks perhaps if you were going 40 hours a week, treating it like a full-time job which of course most of them can't.

Helen: Well intensive is really up to about 20 hours a week. If you came in with minimal or zero English, which is the majority of migrants and refugees and you wanted to achieve basic social proficiency, which is not enough really to get a skilled job or to be an active participant in society, but say you want to get basic social proficiency,... you need to move through three courses basically which take about

300 hours per course. These courses link to an international second language rating scale.

Richard: Right.

Helen: And so to move through that you need to do about 300 hours per course.

Richard: How do you... and we're talking really... you've already mentioned refugees and we are talking about apart from refugees that percentage of migrants that haven't come in on the skills based approach for which English proficiency is often part of it because these people tend to be highly qualified and skilled. How do you cater for that enormous range of starting points if you've got pre-literate people coming from pre-literate societies and people with masters degrees as well, how do you deal with all that?

Helen: Well the very first starting point is you really, you need to assess their language proficiency and their background. So the starting point is an interview with a skilled assessor and people are then put into classes that suit their backgrounds and learning styles. So for example if somebody is a skilled professional perhaps like one of the students that you talked to, then they would go into a fast paced class with others like them. Somebody who was pre-literate would go into a very small group initially and they would be taught skills like how to hold a pen.

Richard: Mm hmm.

Helen: Some of the basic things around the alphabet, signs, but it's a very slow process with them. We have a range of classes to suit people's needs as well so about 25 per cent of people in the program are in employment so that means they need to come at night time or on the weekends or they need to do a distance learning program. There are others who are house bound and again a home tutor or a distance learning program. That said the majority of classes are high intensity in a face-to-face situation at a specifically designed college where we've got on-site child care, individual learning centres where people can do additional work - the types of programs really are designed to meet the group of learners needs.

Richard: On Life Matters we are talking with Helen Zimmerman who's the Managing Director of ACL Group they are one of Australia's biggest English language schools and we are talking about learning English when you arrive in Australia. Now we have already touched on this Helen for immigrants, learning the language isn't the only challenge is it, there is a lot of other stuff to pick up. What do they learn from your settlement classes?

Helen: Settlement classes and English classes are basically the same. This program is unique, it's the only one of its kind in the world. It's federally funded, it's a national program and it really focuses on the English language that you need to settle and integrate into the Australian community. So you're learning language within the context of settlement. So the teaching material revolves around employment and employment matters, health matters, how to take your children to the doctor, how to settle into the local primary school with your children. It's the sort of language you would need in your first year in a country.

Richard: So opening a bank account.

Helen: Opening a bank account.

Richard: Using an ATM.

Helen: Those sorts of things yes.

Richard: And you've already said it would take, depending on what you start with hundreds of hours though. How long does that take in terms of months?

Helen: It can take half a year. If you were moving through those three certificates that's about 900 hours. Now the entitlement is up to 510 hours in the program if you're coming in at minimal or zero proficiency it's unlikely that you will exit within that time period with basic social proficiency. One of the problems is that we need more English.

Richard: Mmmm.

Helen: I think about it's not quite a parallel but if you think about diplomats and those going overseas to work for the Australian Government where they are learning another language. The estimates are that you will need 1800 to 2000 hours to achieve minimal professional proficiency and that's in high intensive classes with educated...

Richard: Yes these people our diplomatic service. They're bright, motivated it's difficult to get in so they're going to be talented folk. Are you saying in effect that the 510 hours that the government will pay for is just not enough?

Helen: That's the entitlement, however if we want people that can move into vocational courses, who can move into the jobs where we have skills shortages, who can be active participants in the local community where they can be standing for local government, where they can be really active participants in their children's schooling, then the answer is that we need to provide more English.

Richard: What do you think success for settlement quote unquote actually means?

Helen: I think it means to be able to feel that you can participate in the life around you in Australia and for Australians to feel that the migrants and refugees are active participants as well that they're contributing to the future of Australia, they're rebuilding their lives and they're assisting to rebuild Australia. Now that at different levels.

Richard: Yes it makes intuitive sense as you say it, but it's actually hard, it's the sort of thing that you know it when you see but it's a hard thing to measure

Helen: It is, it is

Richard: So that gets me to the government proposing a citizenship test with English proficiency as a key part, what do you think about that?

Helen: In the Adult Migrant English Programme, there already are citizenship courses, and last year when the government issued its discussion paper on the proposed citizenship arrangements, we put in a submission to that, as part of that we surveyed students across our colleges and those of our consortium partners University of Western Sydney and Macquarie Community College, and there was really general agreement from students that there should be some form of formal assessment of citizenship. The majority of people believed that knowledge of Australia and people's rights and obligations should be part of applying for citizenship. The point that we made in our submission was that there needs to be careful consideration of any test methodology to ensure validity and fairness.

Richard: We haven't got a lot of information, the government hasn't released a lot of information on this, but we are talking about quite a large amount of multiple choice questions aren't we?

Helen: We are, and in our view the current courses that exist now are a suitable way of testing people. We don't know what the proposed test will be, but we already know that migrants and refugees enthusiastically embrace citizenship courses.

Richard: Mmm.

Helen: We're having our Harmony Day celebrations today.

Richard: Yep.

Helen: And I'm making a presentation to the 10,000th participant in our citizenship courses - and these are courses that have a really high take-up rate and they have an outstandingly good completion rate, 95 per cent complete the courses.

Richard: It's interesting, because you already run these courses, you put them up some time before this emerged as a discussion issue from the government. What do people learn on them?

Helen: Well they're courses that are part of the AMEP. So they are part of their entitlement and they are across Australia. The government has developed these courses and people learn about the rights and responsibilities of being an Australian citizen they learn about Australian law. They learn about the Australian government system uh they learn some of Australian history and they... I've got to say they love them.

Richard: Well that might be a good point to leave it at. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Helen: It's a pleasure Richard thanks.

Richard: Helen Zimmerman's Managing Director of one of Australia's biggest English language schools ACL Group and I'd actually be quite interested to hear about what you have to say about the government bringing in these requirements, a test for citizenship and an English language requirement. You can get onto our website which is at abc.net.au/rn/lifematters and either log onto the guest book or

send us an email from there, we would be very interested to hear what you think.
This is Life Matters and I'm Richard Aedy.

[Ends]